

\$13M allocated to raise lake near Getty home

Opposition says project abuse of power by premier

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Buffalo Lake

The provincial cabinet has approved spending \$13 million to raise the lake beside Premier Don Getty's country home.

Construction and engineering work on the controversial Buffalo Lake project will begin sometime this year, Environment Minister Ralph Klein announced Friday.

The cabinet agreed with the recent report of a public review panel which suggested that the scheme was environmentally safe and should go ahead, Klein said in a prepared statement.

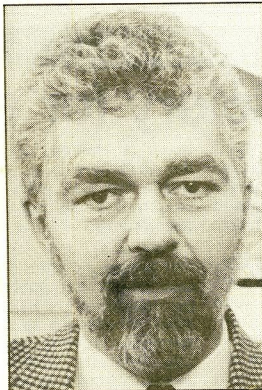
Klein was attending the Calgary Stampede on Friday and was unavailable for further comment.

But opposition politicians said the decision smacks of pork-barrel politicking. Getty's Stettler-area home is located on the southern shore within view of the lake.

"I think it's a phenomenal abuse of the premier's power," said New Democrat environment critic John McInnis.

The on-again, off-again project was killed several times since it was first proposed 22 years ago. McInnis noted that the project was revived just weeks after Getty returned to the legislature in a 1989 byelection in the riding.

Appointing a panel to look into the project was simply a way of jus-



John McInnis

tifying a foregone conclusion, he said.

"The provincial government was poised and ready. It was just a matter of putting it through a veneer of a process," McInnis said. He also criticized the government for releasing the report on a Friday in an effort to minimize negative media coverage.

The panel was told to review the idea early this spring after an economic assessment found that raising the lake would benefit area cot-

tage owners and few others.

But the panel decided that the project would also aid local agriculture as well as the many bathers, boaters and others who visit the area.

Chairman Don Thorne acknowledged that Getty will benefit from raising the lake.

"Certainly he will benefit, but I don't see how he will benefit any more than other people in the area," said Thorne.

Thorne said Buffalo Lake is one of the few bodies of water in the area which can be used for recreational purposes.

But Liberal environment critic Grant Mitchell said he is not convinced that the project won't kill fish in the lake.

The plan was originally killed because of fears that pumping Red Deer River water to raise the lake would create unacceptable amounts of algae, which would rob fish of oxygen.

He called the decision base politics.

"Premier Don Getty is using taxpayers' money as if it were his own," he said. "He's out of control. This guy has got to be stopped."

McInnis said he is still hopeful the federal government will do an environmental impact assessment on the proposal.

The department of fisheries and oceans is reviewing the panel's report.